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In remembrance: Marshall Frady, Southern spellbinder

Never one to use a twopenny word when a tenpenny word would do, seminal Southern writer Marshall Frady engaged the reader as much with his language as with his spellbinding subject matter.

In his revealing biography of the Rev. Billy Graham, Frady wrote of a minor female character that “she had a face as sunless as a boiled onion.”

This kind of spot-on imagery and the habit of florid speech spilled into his everyday conversation. Lavishing praise on a simple meal of chili and cornbread, he once told his host, Atlanta writer Paul Hemphill, “This is sheer gossamer!”

Marshall Bolton Frady, accomplished civil rights journalist and author of the definitive biographies of Graham, George Wallace and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, died March 9 in Greenville.

The 64-year-old writer had come full circle. Born in Augusta, Ga., Frady graduated from Furman in 1963 with a degree in English. After a globetrotting career in print and television, he had returned to his native South as a visiting lecturer and writer-in-residence at Furman.

A fast-acting cancer, diagnosed in February, intervened, said his wife, Barbara Gandolfo-Frady. Frady died the day after he was to begin teaching the first classes of spring term.

(Jackson presided over a memorial service March 12 in North Augusta, S.C.)

Jackson grew up in a poor section of Greenville near Sirmine Stadium, Furman’s former football field, where he parked cars and sold peanuts on game days. He and Frady discovered their common roots years later when Frady began working on the 1996 biography *Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson*.

“We took a flight from our cultures and found each other in another zone,” Jackson said. “We went to Armenia together when the earthquake struck, and we went to Iraq together to bring the Americans home.”

That 1990 rescue mission, during the first Persian Gulf crisis, was detailed in the Jackson biography and in a three-part series in *The New Yorker*.

“He could paint pictures with words, and even in his normal conversation he was a painter,” said Jackson.

He also was an idealist. Gandolfo-Frady said the teen-age Frady was fired with revolutionary zeal after reading *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway. Frady made his way to Cuba, determined to join Fidel Castro’s revolution against Fulgencio Batista. Once on the island, Frady tried to trade his linen suit for a bicycle,



Marshall Frady was a champion of civil rights and social justice.

planning to pedal his way to Castro’s mountain hide-out, but was sent back to the States by the authorities.

Frady finally did meet Castro in 1993 and was working on a biography of the Cuban leader when illness struck.

Frady remained a firebrand at Furman, where he organized a student protest over the quality of the cafeteria food. “We were a comparatively small Southern Baptist college, and students didn’t protest back then,” said John Crabtree, former vice president for academic affairs who taught Frady’s Shakespeare class.

Writing for the student newspaper, Frady editorialized against dress codes and Baptist restrictions on dances, “but he was never ugly about it,” said Crabtree. “He never really forgot his heritage as a boy who grew up in a Baptist minister’s home.” (Frady’s father was the Rev. J. Yates Frady.)

Frady moved to Atlanta in the early 1960s, eventually joining *Newsweek* magazine’s Southern bureau. “His facility was beyond any of the other journalist/writers I’ve ever known,” said Joseph Cumming, who hired Frady. “He writes the way Ella Fitzgerald sings a song.”

Frady’s journalist confreres included Anne Rivers Siddons, who later gained renown as a novelist. She characterized Frady’s aspect as halfway between Southern aristocrat and Southern undertaker. “His eyes were slitted and glinty,” she said. “A lot of times they were just enchanting. You were drawn in by them, by this secret sense of fun.”

Many of Frady’s early magazine stories were gathered in a 1980 volume called *Southerners: A Journalist’s Odyssey*, includ-

ing a profile of the Rev. Will Campbell, Nashville’s minister to outlaw musicians.

Frady was bad to get the goods on his subjects, said Campbell. “You’re automatically suspicious of him, then you fall in love with him, and you tell him anything he wants to know.”

His work took him from Atlanta to New York to California, as he moved between *Newsweek*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper’s* and *Life*, and then to the world of television. Frady was a correspondent for ABC News for about 10 years, but Hemphill said the writer began to dread the perishability of the medium. “He told me, ‘I looked over my shoulder and noticed I wasn’t leaving any tracks, and that’s when I got back to writing.’”

Politics, powerful men and the dynamics of race were the subjects that inspired Frady. In an introduction to *Southerners*, he wrote of his civil rights coverage as part chance, part divine intervention:

“[B]y lucky accident like others of my colleagues during the civil rights movement in the ‘60s, I happened to be writing about the South at one of those climactic moments of truth when everything — past and present, inward and outward — suddenly glares into a resolution larger and more urgent than its ordinary aspect.”

Once, traveling in a New York cab with other Southern expatriates (loosely described during editor Willie Morris’ years at *Harper’s* as the “Pork Chop Conspiracy”), Frady took offense at a clumsy racist comment from the cabbie. “If there’s anything I can’t stand,” Frady said coolly, “it’s an amateur bigot.”

Frady’s best-known book, *Wallace* (published in 1968), was “the prototypical campaign biography,” said writer Steve Oney. The book angered the Wallace family, and when it was turned into a TNT miniseries in 1997, the film crew was refused permission to shoot some scenes in Alabama.

Frady wed Barbara Gandolfo, his fourth wife, in 1989. He had three children from previous marriages.

Friends mourned the loss of his unmistakable presence. “I feel like some elemental force has gone out of the world,” said Siddons. “It kills me to think there won’t be any more Frady stories. We’ll just have to retell the old ones.”

— **Bo Emerson**

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